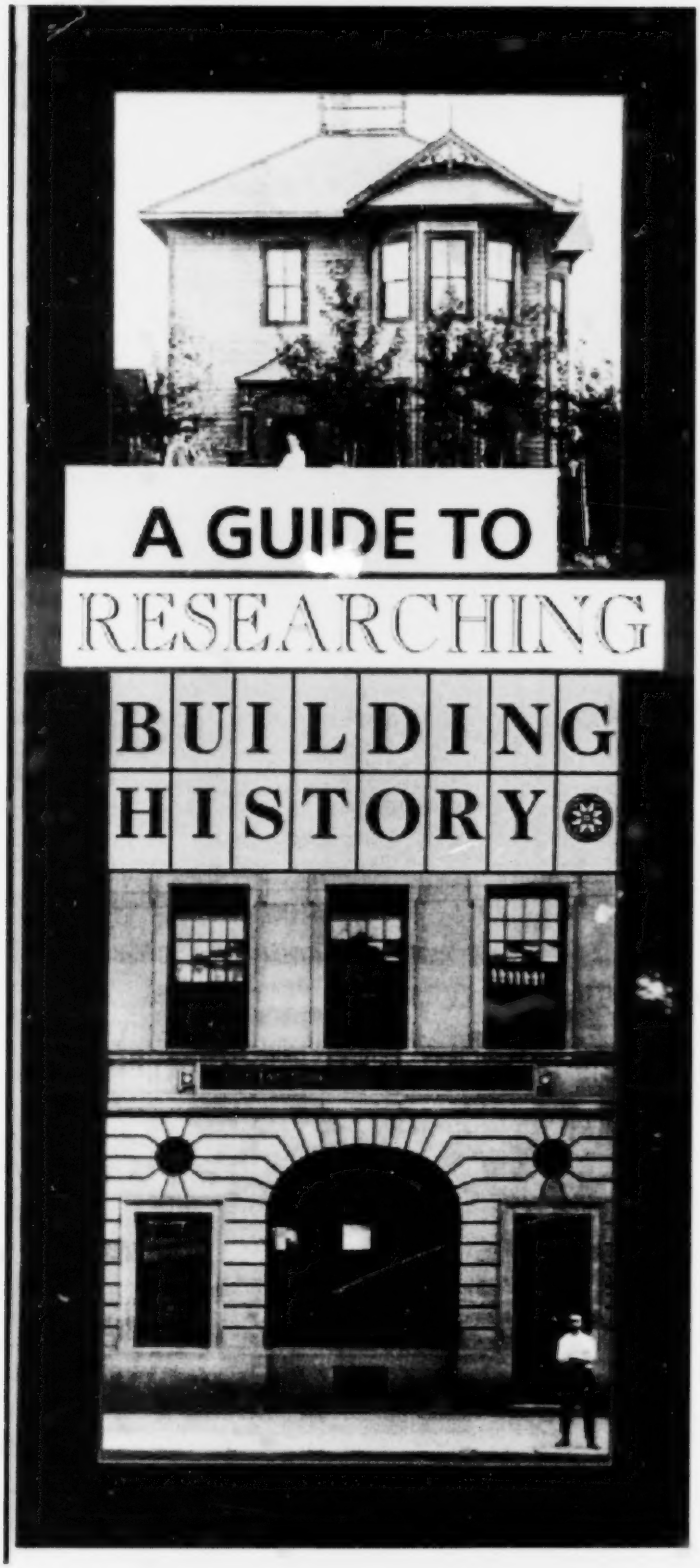

A GUIDE TO
RESEARCHING
BUILDING
HISTORY

104-03589/

Site Specific Information

Researching a building involves two broad types of information – *site-specific* information and *contextual information*. Site specific information provides details about:

- date of construction
- architect and builder
- original layout and appearance
- materials used in construction
- assessed value of property at the time of construction and over time
- renovations and physical improvements
- original and subsequent owners
- use and occupants
- relationship to adjacent buildings and surrounding community

Site information must often be gathered from a variety of public and private sources. While there are several outlets for researching information, it is possible that not all of the details will be found, since some sources of information may no longer exist or may never have existed. Some sources for site specific research include:

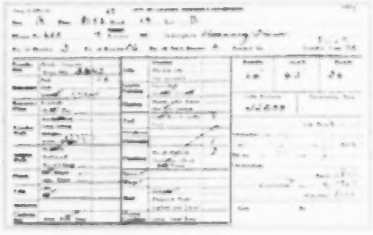
▷ ▶ ▶

1 Alberta Registries and Calgary Land Titles

The first step in researching the history of a property is to identify the title of the land on which the building sits. A land title search can provide details about ownership (original and subsequent), lot size, and mortgages and liens registered against the property. Land title searches can vary in depth depending on how far back in time the researcher would like to go. *(Overviews of the different search levels are described below.)*

In order to conduct a title search at any registry office, you will need to provide a legal description of the property in question. Legal descriptions may be accessed by the property owner free of charge from The City of Calgary's Assessment Department *(see page 16 for address and phone number)*. Non-property owners must pay a $7 fee per legal search. Land title searches may also be conducted at either a private registry company or at the Calgary Land Titles office depending on the level of search required. Please note that the cost of a title search can vary from one office to the next, as Alberta Land Titles no longer provides this service.

Regular Search – can provide land title information ranging from the current date back to approximately 1990. A regular land title search can be conducted through any private registry company. For a list of registry offices in Calgary refer to the Yellow Pages under the heading *License & Registry Services*.



Assessment History Card

Historical Search – allows the researcher to gather information on a specific land title registrant or date. This type of search can be done provided the researcher has the specific name and year associated with the land title. Historical search information is available through any private registry company for the years 1990 until the present. For dates prior to 1990, private registries or the individual researcher may request a historical search through the Calgary Land Titles office *(see page 17 for address and phone number)*.

"Back-to-Patent" Search – is useful for providing the researcher with information on all land title transactions that have been recorded during the life of a property. Back-to-Patent searches for years after 1990 can be conducted at any private registry company, while searches for years prior to 1990 require that the researcher or private registry contact the Calgary Land Titles office. Please note that Calgary Land Titles and most private registries will charge a fee for searching each land title transaction associated with the property.

When conducting any type of search, it should be noted that the name of the owner(s) identified on the title document does not necessarily imply that they were or are the resident(s) of the property. Also, the title itself will not show exactly when a building was constructed; however, the earliest indication that a mortgage has been taken out may signify that a building was constructed on the site at approximately the same time. These details should be confirmed by comparing this information with other sources if possible.

York Hotel

2 City of Calgary Archives

The City of Calgary Archives can provide information on the date of construction, ownership (original and subsequent), the assessed value of the property and associated improvements, and details of construction. To discuss your research requirements call the Archives reference service at (403) 268-8180.

The legal property description is required for any property research at the Archives. The researcher can obtain this information by contacting The City's Assessment Department at (403) 234-7480 and providing the property's street address. The City's Assessment Department is also capable of providing the date of construction to the owner of the property in question.

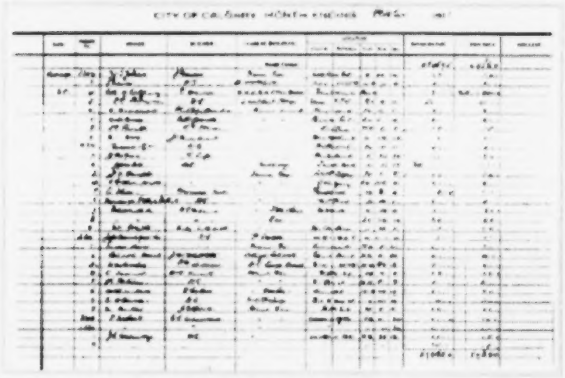
Assessment History Cards - produced between 1935 and 1950, include a brief description of each Calgary building at one time during that period. They offer the following information: the date of construction, dimensions, construction materials, general condition, assessed value, and record of inspections. Dates were not recorded when these cards were in use. The date of construction on these cards is an estimate. You can confirm this date by using assessment rolls and building permit applications.

Assessment Rolls - are compiled by a municipality on a yearly basis for the purpose of taxing the value of the land and any improvements made to the property. Organized according to section, block, lot number, or by roll number, they list the owner's name, an assessed value of the property alone and a value for any buildings or development on the property. These records also provide information on the amenities that the building had when it was first constructed, such as electric lighting, sewer, water, gas connections, and sidewalks. Using assessment rolls, the researcher can determine the year a house was constructed by locating the first year the property shows any improvements. A substantial rise in assessed value usually indicates new construction.

Building Permits - provide the most direct access to information on a site's construction activity. For each building, a building permit indicates the date of application, the permit number (assigned in chronological order of application receipts), the property's legal description, the applicant and/or builder, the name of the architect (if any), the purpose or type of building, and the value of the project. Since these registers are not indexed by any of the categories of information noted above, the best way to search for the original application is to obtain an approximate date of construction. The City of Calgary Archives maintains Building Permit Registers from limited years.

Photographs and Architectural Plans - The City of Calgary Archives has a very limited number of residential property plans (approximately 20) and most of these are of apartment buildings in the downtown and inner city area.

It is possible, but not likely, that the Archives will have a photograph of the property being researched. The collection does have some photographs of residential street scenes that the researcher may want to consult. The Glenbow Archives also has a photograph collection, as does the Calgary Public Library within its Local History Collection. Any of these collections may prove useful to the researcher.



Building Permit Ledger

3 Municipal Directories and Telephone Books

Municipal directories and telephone books should be used to supplement information from archival sources about land ownership, taxation, and regulation. Caution however should be exercized when using directories, because they were not always updated quickly and sometimes they continued to use out-of-date information until new material was made available. In addition, it is important to be aware that street names and/or numbers sometimes changed over the years, as did the house numbers.

One of the most useful municipal directories is the *Henderson's* directory. These privately published Canadian directories allow a property to be searched either through a street address or a resident's name. The first *Henderson's* directories dealt primarily with Winnipeg and secondarily with towns in the Northwest Territories. By 1908, Calgary and other centres in Alberta had their own directories. Henderson's urban directories can also be used to learn about the history of adjacent properties in order to bring together a rough sketch of the changing character of the street over time. It should be noted that not all businesses and residents of the time were listed in these directories, as inclusion was voluntary.

Henderson's Directory

Henderson's directories are divided into four sections:

1. ***Buyers' Guide*** – contains listings of local businesses or services categorized according to function.

2. ***Alphabetical Directory*** – lists the names of local adult residents as well as their respective marital status, occupation and address. The names and address of local business are also included in this section along with listings of their official personnel and the nature of the business.

3. ***Directory of Householders, including Street and Avenue Guide*** – contains listings of street and residence addresses arranged in numerical and alphabetical order, names of respective householders and concerns, designation of owner occupied residencies, and telephone numbers of homes and businesses.

4. ***Numerical Telephone Directory*** – lists telephone numbers in numerical order.

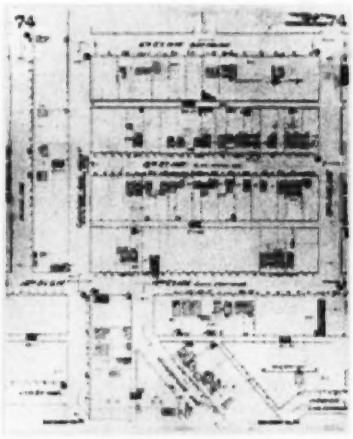
The City of Calgary Archives has a limited number of *Henderson's* directories spanning the years 1955 to 1991. Both the Glenbow Library and the W.R. Castell Library's Local History collection have *Henderson's* directories for Manitoba and the North West Territories from 1885 to 1906 and Calgary *Henderson's* directories going back to 1906. In addition, the Glenbow Library also has *Gronlund's* directory from 1902 and *Burns & Elliot's* directory of industries and resources from 1885. Calgary telephone directories from 1903 to present can be found in the W.R. Castell Library's Local History collection.

4 Historical Maps

Fire insurance plans are detailed urban maps and are often the most useful mapping source for researching buildings. These maps were produced for the insurance industry in Canada up to the 1950s by Charles E. Goad and later by the Western Canada Insurance Underwriters' Association. These maps were kept up to date, as alterations were made and new buildings constructed, through frequent surveys of the community. The layouts of buildings, their location on the lot, roof types, construction materials, the number of storeys, property lines, the purpose of the building, and even such things as cornices, fire walls, or elevators are documented on these maps. In addition, the names of commercial and government structures are often provided.

The City of Calgary Archives maintains a collection of fire insurance maps, mostly of the downtown area and between the years 1908 to 1947, and from 1954 to 1972. The Glenbow Library maintains a full set of Calgary fire insurance maps spanning the years 1908 to 1972.

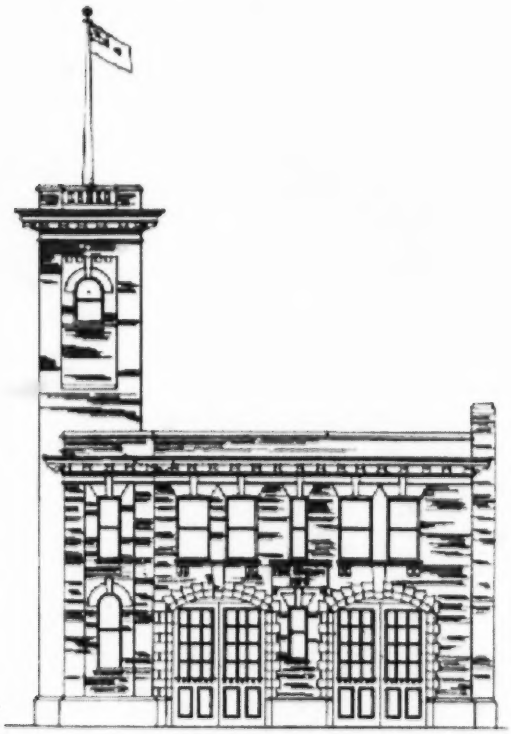
The W.R. Castell Central Library has a collection of Calgary street maps from 1907 to present. In addition, the Glenbow Library also has a collection of historic street maps, as well as a list of the names of streets, before they were changed to street numbers in 1904.



Fire Insurance Plan
Charles E. Goad Co.
c. 1911

5 Architectural Plans

Blueprints of building elevations and floor plans (primarily for public or large commercial buildings) may be available through the University of Calgary's Canadian Architectural Archives, the Provincial Archives of Alberta, and the Glenbow Archives. Finding out the name of the architect is the first step in accessing these documents, since they are generally organized by the name of the individual architect or architectural firm. When using blueprints, it is necessary to check whether changes were made between their preparation and the actual construction of the building.

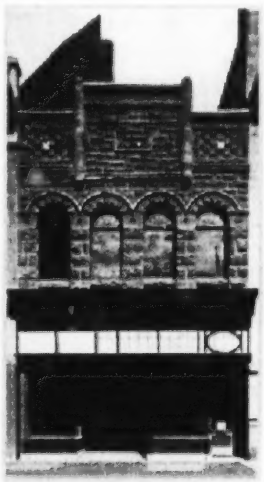


ELEVATION ON 10TH AVE. E.

6 Historical Photographs

The Provincial and Glenbow Archives and the W.R. Castell Central Library's Local History Collection have photograph collections organized under various subject headings. While prominent buildings may be listed under their own headings, some other headings are related to people, events, streets, and building types. The researcher may be able to find reference to a particular building in photographs of people associated with the site or events, such as parades, street festivals, and ceremonies.

The University of Calgary's MacKimmie Library maintains a collection of air photos both vertical and oblique dating back to 1924. Air photos enable the researcher to map out changes to a particular property and surrounding community over time. The City of Calgary Archives also has a collection of vertical air photos of the city and surrounding area from 1951 until 1991.



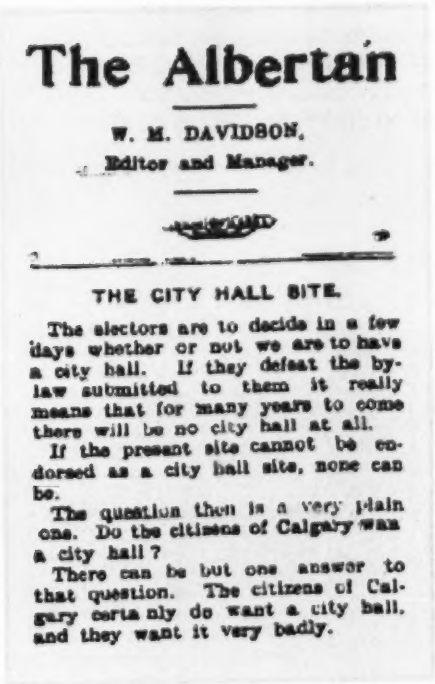
Tribune Block,
Stephen Avenue Walk

Walker Residence,
Inglewood Bird Santuary

7 Local Newspapers

Newspapers are useful for finding accounts of buildings under construction. During the pre World War I boom in particular, newspapers in Alberta communities included accounts of most public buildings and outstanding private residences. Local newspapers however should be read with a critical eye, as they were not always completely accurate.

The Glenbow Library and Calgary Public Library have collections of Calgary newspapers available on microfilm, and most Alberta local papers are available at the Legislature Library in Edmonton.



The Albertan

W. M. DAVIDSON,
Editor and Manager.

THE CITY HALL SITE.

The electors are to decide in a few days whether or not we are to have a city hall. If they defeat the by-law submitted to them it really means that for many years to come there will be no city hall at all.

If the present site cannot be endorsed as a city hall site, none can be.

The question then is a very plain one. Do the citizens of Calgary want a city hall?

There can be but one answer to that question. The citizens of Calgary certainly do want a city hall, and they want it very badly.

The Morning Albertan,
Monday, February 18, 1907

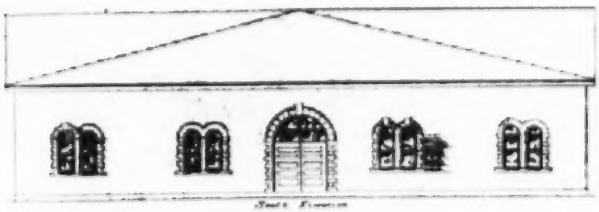
Credit: Calgary Sun

8 Government Inventories

The City of Calgary's *Inventory of Potential Heritage Sites* is a list of sites built 45 years before the present date that have been evaluated according to a Council-approved process by the Heritage Advisory Board. Sites are evaluated on the basis of their historical and architectural significance and their importance to their urban context. The list contains provincially and municipally designated historical resources, as well as sites identified by the Board as having potential historic significance.

The City's Heritage Planner maintains a file on each of these sites. Each file contains a summary history, an evaluation summary, and some background information such as photographs, newspaper articles, or reports. The type and amount of background information however varies from file to file. Contact the Heritage Planner at (403) 268-5326 to make an appointment to view these files.

The Province maintains a computerized database of potential historic buildings called the *Historic Sites & Archives Inventory of Historic Buildings*. Contact the Historic Sites & Archives office in Edmonton at (780) 431-2300 to have a search conducted on a particular house or building. The Glenbow Archives also maintains a hard copy version of this database. However, this collection does not include new entries completed since 1990. Community associations may hold copies of recent database entries, notably those of Inglewood/Ramsay, Crescent Heights, Elbow Park, Hillhurst/Sunnyside and Mission/Cliff Bungalow.



Contextual History Information

The second type of information required by the researcher is contextual history information. In order to make sense of the site specific information and evaluate its broader significance, it must be set into its historical and architectural context. In other words, contextual information allows the researcher to place the building in the history of the society that built and used it. The emphasis in this type of research is on effectively finding and using the literature that has been produced on the subject.

Secondary sources are the researcher's most valuable resource in this search. Even if nothing has been written about a specific building, the researcher can often find information on buildings of a similar type or period or on related subjects that will help place the building within its appropriate historical and architectural context.

General histories of the province and region provide a good starting point and will help to locate a particular building within the general framework or development of the province. Local histories provide a more focused context and are useful for identifying periods of growth or development of specific businesses, services, or institutions. General architectural histories may also be useful in evaluating a design in terms of broad stylistic trends. However, these studies are most relevant in assessing large, architect-designed buildings.

The W.R. Castell Library's Local History Collection maintains a guide on Calgary communities, as well as a bibliography on the subject of "house history" tailored to assist those researching houses in Alberta.

A few selected publications available at the W.R. Castell Library which deal with Alberta and Calgary specifically are listed below:

Boddy, Trevor. *Modern Architecture in Alberta*. Regina: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism and The Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987.

Dennis, Thelma. *Albertans Built: Aspects of Housing in Rural Alberta to 1920*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Printing Services, 1986.

Melnyk, Bryan. *Calgary Builds: The Emergence of an Urban Landscape 1905-1914*. Regina: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism and The Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985.

Treacy, Robert M. *Sandstone, Brick and Wood: A Collection of Calgary Pioneer Homes and Histories*. Calgary, 1975.

Wetherell, Donald G. and Irene Kmet. *Homes in Alberta: Building Trends and Design 1870-1967*. Edmonton: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism, Alberta Municipal Affairs and The University of Alberta Press, 1991.

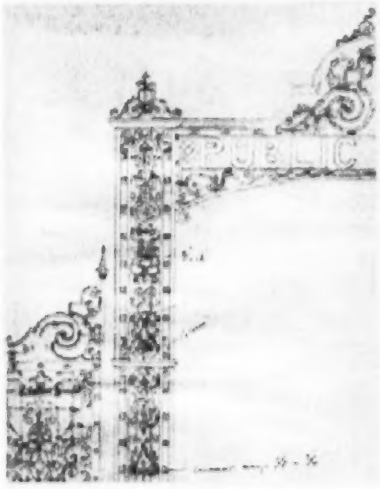
The Local History Department also has a number of non-circulating, reference materials on the subject of Alberta houses and buildings. Some of these include general books on Alberta and Calgary history and architecture, and house and plan catalogues.

Research Contacts

The City of Calgary Assessment Department
3rd Floor, 800 Macleod Trail SE
(403) 234-7480
Mailing Address:
Assessment Department, #8002
The City of Calgary
PO Box 2100, Station M
Calgary, AB T2P 2M5

The City of Calgary Archives
313 – 7 Avenue SE
(403) 268-8180
Mailing Address:
City Clerk's Department, #8007
The City of Calgary
PO Box 2100, Station M
Calgary, AB T2P 2M5
ccarch@gov.calgary.ab.ca

The City of Calgary, Heritage Advisory Board and Heritage Planner
4th Floor, 800 Macleod Trail SE
(403) 268-5326
Mailing Address:
Planning & Building Department, #8108
The City of Calgary
PO Box 2100, Station M
Calgary, AB T2P 2M5



Alberta Historic Sites Service
Alberta Community Development
Old Stephen's College
8820 - 112 Street
Edmonton, AB T6G 2P8
(780) 431-2300

Calgary Land Titles
John J. Bowlen Building
620 - 7 Avenue SW
Calgary, AB T2P 0Y8
(403) 297-5396

Glenbow Museum Library & Archives
130 - 9 Avenue SE
Calgary, AB T2G 0P3
(403) 268-4197 Library
(403) 268-4204 Archives
www.glenbow.org

Local History Collection
W.R. Castell Central Library
616 Macleod Trail SE
Calgary, AB T2G 2M2
(403) 260-2785
www.public-library.calgary.ab.ca/tours/tours.htm

MacKimmie Library
University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4
(403) 220-7420 Canadian Architectural Archives
(403) 220-8132 or (403) 220-6822 for Maps, Academic Data, and Geographic Information Centre (MADGIC)

Provincial Archives of Alberta
Alberta Community Development
12845 - 102 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5N 0M6
(780) 427-1750
paa@mcd.gov.ab.ca

View of James Short School looking north.
Credit: Glenbow Archives

THE CITY OF CALGARY
Archives
Heritage Advisory Board

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